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ABSTRACT

Reading is best understood as a dialectic process where the influence of reader and text are constantly merging to create a jointly produced and evolving understanding. What occurs as the reader and text come together during reading is similar in form to a dialogue, a model for the reader-text relationship that has not been explored in the reader response literature. Establishing an empirical basis for the study of the reader-text relationship requires an ability to isolate the nature of the relationship as it exists at any one moment and then develops over time. The interruption method offers this ability by presenting the ideas, feelings, and associations of the reader for immediate analysis. This method consists of dividing the text into 12 sections and then recording the reader's responses to each section on audiotape. The result is an assortment of actual data that allows for an analysis of the reader-text relationship over multiple parts of the reading. This kind of analysis will show that the reader-text relationship is a mutually dependent one composed of the interactive influence of both reader and text and the creation at each moment of a singular synthesis of meaning. (MS)

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A Dialectical Approach to Reader Response

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When someone reads a literary text, it is widely acknowledged that she not only reads the words as written, but has recourse to her own experiences for understanding. Thus, the text comes to life in each reading in an individualized form. At the same time, this form is believed to be constrained by the text itself. Describing this process has presented a challenge for theories of reading comprehension. They must find a way to unite the text with all its inherent potentialities and the reader with all her experience.

Historically, reader response theorists have described an interaction between the reader and the text. These interactive approaches seek ways of emphasizing both the activities of the reader and the powerful influence of the text. However, if one starts an exploration of reader response to a text with the assumption of an essential separation between reader and text, or between subject and object, one is faced with a major theoretical impediment in reconciling the two poles. For example, while generously allowing for the constructive role of the reader, Wolfgang Iser (1978), a prominent reader response theorist, describes the meaning as "prefigured" in the text. If this is the case then the activity or influence of the reader seems illusory. She would ultimately be constrained to find the meaning that has been placed there by the author. On the other hand, Norman Holland's (1975) psychoanalytically-oriented work emphasizes the way in which individual psychodynamics alter one's

reading of a text. Similarly, Stanley Fish (1980) underlines the way in which an understanding of texts is constrained by the intellectual communities to which the reader belongs. In both these instances the power of the reader is ultimately so strong that one wonders how the text exerts any influence at all.

Perhaps there is a way to avoid the problems that inhere in this basic separation of reader and text. If one understands both reader and text as linked together in a system that evolves over the course of the reading than it may be possible to circumvent the dilemma that is posed when reader and text are considered separately. In other words, if the emphasis is shifted away from reader or text and the influence of each to an examination of the reading moment as it occurs over time, then an understanding of comprehension becomes a function of an unfolding developmental process continuously affected by both reader and text. From this perspective reader and text are seen as mutually affecting each other and as mutually dependent on each other. Neither functions nor in fact can function apart from the other. The text is inert until brought to life by the reader and the reader is unread until impacted by the text. In short, perhaps reading is best understood as a dialectic process where the influence of reader and text are constantly merging to create a jointly produced and evolving understanding.

In my opinion what actually occurs as the reader and text come together during reading is similar in form to a dialogue.

Over the course of the reading process the reader brings her own independent experience to bear as it is triggered by the text. Once triggered, in any particular moment, it no longer exists independently of the text. Similarly the text, once affected by the experience of the reader, no longer maintains an independent structure, but becomes a function of the reader's construction. In effect, the reader and text generate a dialogic relationship that is different than each but contributed to by both. Put another way, the reader relates to the text as if she were in a conversation. First she organizes and anticipates her experience in response to the textual structure and then looks to the text to see how this fits the world as she sees it stipulated by the text. The text, in effect responds by fitting her perspective or not. There is an ongoing movement as the reader forges a sense of the world of the text that exists in distinction from or in conjunction with her own world. Thus she comes to know her own world, a "new" world which is a result of the conversation or dialogue she has with the text.

The concept of dialogue as a model for the reader-text relationship has not been explored in the reader response literature. There are, however, several authors that appear to allude to a dialogue between reader and text. Fetterley (1978), for example, has written about the resisting reader. In this model a feminist reader is described as resisting the patriarchal vision inherent in much literature; instead she

constructs an idea of the text more in line with her own sympathies. In other words, the reader chooses to stand concsciously outside the world of the text and to read it differently. The implication is that the reader must simultaneously be aware of two potential readings, the traditional one embodied in the text which would reinforce the patriarchal position and another which is truer to a feminine perspective. Consequently to be a resisting reader would seem to require an ongoing dialogue between the two potential readings.

Kathleen McCormick and Gary Waller (1987) also imply a dialogue between reader and text during the reading process. In their view, both the text and reader represent ideologies-beliefs, assumptions and visions of their respective societies. Specific combinations of these ideologies represent the repertoires of reader and text. The reader is thought to have access to the repertoire of the text as a result of her extra-textual information, for example, the knowledge she might have of the historical era in which the text was written. This can lead to three different types of readings according to McCormick and Waller: a match where the reader knows the repertoire of the text; a mismatch when the reader cannot understand the repertoire of the text; and a clash. In a clash the reader knows how the text is intended to be read but chooses not to read in this way. This is referred to as a "strong reading". In order to produce a strong reading it would seem that the reader must simultaneously

evoke two texts. In other words she must comprehend a reading to which she chooses not to resonate with as well as another which matches the world as she wants to see it. Again, there is the implication that the reading process can generate a kind of dialogue between reader and text. Patrocinio Schweikert's (1986) work illustrates still another example where reader and text are thought to have the potential for generating a dialogic relationship. In this case Schweikert refers to the reader's capacity to evoke the mind and intentions of the author, and so a kind of conversation can be produced during the reading between the world of the feminist reader and the world of the woman writer.

Although the authors just cited present interesting formulations, none of them refer explicitly to the concept of dialogue as a general model for the reading process. Their work is focused in each case upon a specific kind of reading that is not assumed to occur across all forms of the reading process. Furthermore the dialogue that is alluded to does not represent a dialectic synthesis where the influence of reader and text combine in the reading moment to create a conjoint product. The present paper, of course, does assume that the reading process is always best described as a dialogue where the mutually dependent contibutions of reader and text are constantly working together to create meaning. My interest is in exploring how these ideas are manifested in actual reading experiences.

An Empirical Exploration of the Reader-Text Relationship

Establishing an empirical basis for the study of the reader-text relationship requires an ability to isolate the nature of the relationship as it exists at any one moment and then develops over time. This makes it possible to in effect "capture" the reader's responses as they actually occur. The ideas, false starts, feelings and associations of the reader are available for analysis as they immediately affect and are effected by the text. The interruption method which I developed for previous research (Davis, 1987) offers an opportunity to approximate this goal. In this method the text is divided into twelve sections. These vary in length with each story. Each section is presented to the reader in sequential order. After reading each section the reader is encouraged to express freely all of her thoughts and feelings as they have arisen in response to that particular section. All of the reader's responses are tape recorded. When a text is read by the interruption method the result is a rich assortment of actual data that allows for an analysis of the reader-text relationship over multiple parts of the reading.

Thus far the interruption method has beenused to collect reader response data for two texts, "The Magic Barrel" by Bernard Malamud and "The Fly" by Katherine Mansfield. Today I am going to present excerpts from data from three readers who read "The Fly". Before describing my analysis of the readings, I will

briefly summarize the story.

"The Fly" is the story of a retired man who comes to visit the boss. They retired man discusses how his daughters have gone to visit his son's grave in Belgium and at the time saw the boss's son's grave. He departs, leaving the boss to ponder his son's death and the loss to himself. The boss discovers himself unable to cry as he had expected to do. Instead while brooding, he discovèrs a fly in his ink. He rescues the fly. The fly appears to be saved and then he begins to submerge the fly in drops of ink and watch the fly struggle to survive. Ultimately the fly succumbs and dies.

I am going to present the findings from several different perspectives. First, to reiterate the point that was made at the beginning of the presentation, I want to demonstrate that the meaning does not appear to be simply a function of the textual structure or of reader experience. When the fly is introduced, readers uniformly express disappointment. The fly is recognized as symbolic but in an obvious way. It appears as too neat a match for the man mourning his lost son to be able to symbolically rescue him by saving the fly. As each reader saw his/her predictions frustrated a similar shift in mode occurred. When the boss does not save the fly but in fact tortures it, readers are faced with their own lack of control. In experiencing their own inability to predict or shape the outcome of the story, they are led inward to explore their own feelings

about the duality of victim and victimization. Variations of response begin to occur. These variations are a reflection of the individualized themes that have pervaded each reader's responses as well as specific reactions to the torturing of the fly. These range from the ability to identify with the torture of small creatures to a complete inability which leaves the reader perplexed. In this example of the relationship between text and three readers neither prefigured structure nor individual experience is sufficient to explain the meaning that each reader-text relationship generates.

I will turn now to some evidence that bears upon the applicability of a dialogic model where the mutual influence of reader and text seems to create an ongoing synthesis of meaning. For purposes of demonstration, I am going to focus upon one reader's responses to "The Fly."

As this reader engages with the text he reads slowly and carefully, choosing small components of the text for analysis. Early in the reading he focuses on the power relations implied by the character of the boss. He links this aspect of the text to his own personal situation: "one thing which just came to mind when I - this is probably out of my own personal reaction - ... I immediately was getting prepared for some tension because of the implication of power." As he reads the text two main themes develop in his understanding of the content, both of which he connects with his own personal situation which in turn color his

ongoing sense of the text. The first is a continuing reference to power relations and what effect he imagines this has both on the boss and on the employee. He says, "But it also said, 'staring almost greedily at the boss' which did have at least some feeling of envy in it, of coveting the boss's position. One of the things that really comes out because of my own personal situation, having been unemployed for some time, because of my own conflicts in the last job is that I immediately have some antipathy for the image of the boss." However, the reader's personal experience is never simply imposed on his understanding of the text. While it clearly effects his understanding, it is just as clear that the textual structure forces the readers to consider additional meanings for the boss. When the boss brings some whiskey out to share with Woodifield, he says, "You can also see he does have some genuine feeling". At any one reading moment it is the combined influence of reader and text that is responsible for the meaning that is created.

The second theme is the psychological experience of the boss in regard to the death of his son. Here too, the reader's own experience is stimulated by the boss, but this time in a empathic way. Recognizing "that there are a lot of things troubling him" the reader sees he is beginning to feel some empathy for the boss. He later will connect the boss's experience with death with his own feelings of being a father and how terrible such a death must be.

The dialogue between text and reader combine to generate multiple vicissitudes to the jointly dervied themes of power and death. The text stimulates the reader to recall his own experiences which impacts his understanding of the text which in turn may be altered or strengthened as the text continues to unfold.

The reader-text relationship that develops and then evolves in regard to the fly is another example of the reading process as dialogue. When the fly is introduced into the story the reader has two initial reactions. One derives from his experience with literature. He assumes that the fly is a symbolic substitution for the boss's son and he feels the symbol is a trite one. At the same time, the reader believes that the boss's compassion for the fly indicates something positive about the boss. Then, when in fact the story does not progress in the the manner the reader expected he changes his belief that the fly is a trite symbol. Abruptly he sees the fly as multi-dimensional, capable of representing several forces within the story. On one level, he remarks that the boss, overcome by his feelings of grief, may be looking to the fly as a model of survival. In other words, if the fly can survive, than the boss, too, can resist the metaphorical cloud of ink that engulfs him. However, at the same time, the reader notes that the boss is in control and perhaps his sadistic treatment of the fly is emblematic of a military mentality that might have been responsible for his son's death.

Moreover, the failure of the fly to survive may represent the boss's own fatalistic attitude. "It's almost as if he's trying to get the fly to die to reinforce or reconfirm his own fatalism in life." Concommitant with and interconnected with these meanings are the reader's own feelings about the killing of the fly. Initially he identifies with the killing of the fly describing it in this way: "First of all a fly is usually associated with an insect that is particularly filthy, something you would want to kill." However, the reader revises his opinion as the status of the fly seems to change. He comes to feel that the boss has elevated the fly to a symbolic status and therefore the fly can no longer be the anonymous filthy creature it might otherwise be considered. A dialogic description of the reader-text relationship permits a way of showing the necessary input of both reader and text in the creation of understanding.

In conclusion, it has been the purpose of this paper to present a dialectic approach to the reading process. From this perspective the reading process itself and the comprehension which accompanies it is best described and understood as a product of a dialogue between reader and text. The reader-text relationship is a mutually dependent one composed of the ongoing influence of both reader and text and creating at each moment a singular synthesis of meaning.

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